DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 229 785 CS 207 530

AUTHOR Whitlock, Roger
TITLE Writing in the Introductory Literature Class.
PUB DATE Mar 83
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (34th, Detroit, MI, March 17-19, 1983).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Assignments; Higher Education; Instructional Improvement; *Literary Criticism; *Literature Appreciation; *Narration; *Personal Narratives; Student Characteristics; Student Needs; *Teaching Methods; *Writing Exercises

ABSTRACT

The typical assignment in introductory literature courses asking students to interpret the meaning of a work is inappropriate for most college students because it makes demands they cannot meet, it does not give them transferable skills, and it does not promote a love of literature. Instead, teachers should give assignments that encourage students to produce writing that gives its readers a glimpse into the process by which a particular student has understood or even failed to understand a work of serious literature. Assignments for specified audiences and purposes that ask students to write letters and reports about how they experienced what they have read can produce such writing. By doing such assignments, students discover that their opinions and experiences are important and thus they learn to express themselves rather than to write what they think the teachers want them to write. (Sample assignments are included.) (JL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED229785

Roger Whitlock
Department of English
University of Hawaii
Honolulu, HI 96822

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Roger Whitlock

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Writing in the Introductory Literature Class

On the sheet you have in front of you are the first three paragraphs of a paper I received recently from a sophomore college student in an introduction to literature class. I'd like to read the paragraphs aloud to you, make some observations about the writing, and then draw some conclusions. The paragraphs were written by a student named Leigh Funayama.

When I first read "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" by Robert Frost, I didn't like it. This was the first poem in the book that I didn't like. I was confused as to what the message was in the poem. It just didn't make sense to end the poem with "And miles to go before I sleep / And miles to go before I sleep." I wondered why Frost repeated himself. I drew only blanks after each examination of the poem and wanted to conclude that the last line must be a misprint. I even began to believe

CS 207 530

that I was the man in the woods who had miles to go before he slept. I had much to read for History and an Economics mid-term the next day.

Memorizing the poem was the easiest task of all. The words are so simple that even a child could remember them. I liked the meter of the poem and I could never get over its ringing tone. Aside from its physical characteristics, the poem has a hidden drive to it.

That drive is a drive of will. As shown in the poem, it's motivation that keeps us moving to attain our goals in life. This drive in the poem is represented by the horse. It is the horse who steers and delivers the man to his destination. This is evident in the lines "My little horse must think it queer / To stop without a farmhouse near." I feel that the will, being the horse, is confused about stopping in the woods....

Let's look at the first and the third paragraphs. It seems to me that the writing in these two paragraphs is very different. In the first paragraph what we have is someone reporting--rather informally and straightforwardly--his experience when he first read the Frost poem. He didn't like the poem, he tells us, because he was confused about its meaning--a confusion, he goes on to say, that was mainly due to the repeated last two lines. He also tells us that he tried to figure out why Frost repeated those lines, but didn't have much luck. At the end of the paragraph he comes,

somewhat humorously, to identify himself with the poem's narrator: like that narrator, Leigh finds that he has "miles to go before he sleeps."

What is clear about this paragraph is that it is someone's unique experience--that uniqueness comes through, I think, in details like "I...wanted to conclude that the last line must be a misprint." The paragraph is also marked by its honesty: students don't usually tell their professor that they didn't like an assigned poem. What's more, the passage has a nice coherence: the writer moves from topic to topic, sentence to sentence, in an easy-to-follow way. Furthermore, the writing is interesting; the record of someone who is seriously attempting to come to grips with a literary text.

The third paragraph is a different matter. Gone is the writer's uncertainty; here Leigh announces the poem's meaning: "[it is] motivation that keeps us moving to attain our goals in life. This drive in the poem is represented by the horse. It is the horse who steers and delivers the man to his destination," and so on. Also gone is what was abundant in the first paragraph--the writer's experience of the poem. In the third paragraph, for instance, there is no record of the mental processes by which Leigh arrived at his conclusion that "This drive...is represented by the horse." What is also missing, it seems to me, is life: the writing has suddenly gone flat.

What kind of writing is the writing in paragraph three? Typical

is the first word that comes to my mind--typical of the kind of writing we usually get from students in introductory literature courses when we ask them to write about what they have read and to analyze its significance, interpret its meaning. In short, the traditional literary paper. (In such papers students are asked to do such things as discuss the function of a certain character in a play or trace a certain theme through a novel.) Leigh no doubt learned how to do this kind of paper in the many English classes he took before he arrived in mine. He learned that you must interpret the work's message (he is, remember, uncomfortable at the start of his paper because he doesn't know what that message is). He learned that he must prove his interpretation by giving evidence, quoting the work whenever possible. And he probably learned from past English classes not to be wishy-washy; hence, in paragraph three, there is no tentativeness. If anything, he brazens his way through to an interpretation: "That drive is a drive of will. ... [It] is represented by the horse." And so on. I can almost hear the sigh of relief he must have breathed when he completed the paragraph. Like the horse in the poem he is interpreting, he has done his duty by doing the assignment. And he has got the man--me, his teacher--off his back.

Somewhere between paragraph one and three, the writer clicked onto automatic pilot: he turned away from his own experience of "Stopping by Woods"--what happened in him as he read and thought about the poet's words--and slipped into writing about the poem the

way he had learned to write about literature in the past. I think the predicament he must have faced is clear in paragraph two. But before we take a look at that paragraph, let me give you the assignment I had given to Leigh:

> Your second paper is to be a report to me about your various responses over a period of time to a particular poem by Robert Frost. You might begin by talking about any exposure you had to the poem before you entered this class. You might quote from any freewritings you did on the poem or from any of the other in-class writing exercises you did on it. You might tell me about something that happened in you when we talked about the poem in class, or when you were riding home on the bus, or when you were memorizing lines from it.... In short, I want you to describe your developing relationship with the poem: "I started here; I went through this...and this...and this; this is where I ended up." Be honest; tell the truth. ... I am, as I was in your first paper, looking for some interaction between you and the poem you have chosen to write about. I want to get a good sense of you in this essay; I want to hear your voice. I also want to hear about the poem....

In retrospect, a rather long-winded assignment--a friend recently called it "monumentally fuzzy." I knew, however, from past experience that this assignment was difficult--students are not used

to writing about their responses, don't trust them, don't even know most of them--so I wanted to give them as many ways into their papers as I could.

Leigh's task was, then, to show me some interaction between himself and Frost's poem. At the start of his second paragraph he is still doing this. It was easy to memorize the poem, he says; the words are simple, even childish. O.K., a statement of fact. But is he making a judgment here? Does he think, because "even a child could remember the poem's words," the poem itself was childish? Does he perhaps think he's childish for choosing it? We don't know; he doesn't tell us. As a reader, I wait for him to flesh out what he has said, but all I get are the bare bones of his experience. Nor does he tell us why he likes the meter of the poem so well. Or what he means by the poem's "ringing tone." And the last sentence is simply unclear: what does he mean by "physical characteristics," by "hidden drive"? It is clear that the writer in this paragraph has lost his bearings--and to get them back, he turns to something he knows how to do and attempts to find the Hidden Meaning in the poem, its "hidden drive."

Despite Leigh's difficulty in doing--for his entire paper at any rate--what I had asked him to do, I would like to suggest that such assignments are well worth the effort it takes to train students to do them and that maybe we should teach an altogether different kind of writing about literature than has been traditionally taught in literature and composition classes.

That kind of writing usually proves to all but a few of our introductory students that they aren't much good. It drives the weakest to Cliff's Notes, others to critical articles, and it reenforces in almost all of them the notion that there is nothing they could say about this work of literature; their own judgment is not to be trusted, nor is their own experience. In short, the traditional literary essay, a highly sophisticated form, requires them to do an inappropriate kind of writing. It is inappropriate because most of them are not going to major in English and thus will not need to practice what they have been taught. And while it is usually argued that the writing and reasoning skills they learn in writing traditional literary papers are transferable--and will be used when students have to write academic papers in other departments--there is little evidence to show that this is the case. And even if it were, I would argue that their writing is not improved in the process. And finally, the traditional literary essay is inappropriate because it does not promote one of main goals of the introductory literature class: a love of literature.

"The natural direction of communication," Peter Elbow says, "is to explain what you understand to someone who doesn't understand it. But in writing an essay for a teacher," he goes on to say, "your task is usually to explain what you are still engaged in trying to understand to someone who understands it better." That, I would suggest, is most students' problem when they write about

literature for their English professors: their understanding of the work of literature they're writing about is imperfect or incomplete. But, within the form, there is no way for them to acknowledge that. Not outright, at least; implicitly, of course, it's there and it shows. They pretend to know the answers, to have arrived at the writer's message; they brazen their way through to an interpretation, putting aside their uncertainty, their ignorance, their confusion. The result is student writing that is not honest--is, in fact, phony--because it is not the whole truth, not even a part of the truth. On top of that, it is usually very dull.

The kind of writing that I would like to see our students encouraged to do is writing that gives its readers a glimpse into the process by which a particular student has understood or even failed to understand a work of serious literature. It is writing that hopes to reengage them in the literature they read, that allows them to see resemblances and make connections between their experience and the experience in the book--to identify with something or someone, the way my student Leigh does when he says "I even began to believe that I was the man in the woods who had miles to go before he slept." ~~I had much to read for History and an Economics mid-term the next day." Leigh~~ does ~~understand the last two lines of the poem~~.

To get this kind of writing from my students, I often ask them to do narrative writing about the literature they have read, to write letters and reports about how they experienced what they have

read. In such assignments, audience and purpose are always clearly specified. Let me give you some examples of some of those assignments.

Sample Assignments #1

1. In the form of a letter to the class, write a paper in which you describe, first of all, your initial response to the story (what happened in you when you first read it) and then tell what your response to the story was after we talked about it in class and after you reread it outside of class.

2. Describe in some detail your response to a specific scene or passage in The Mill on the Floss. Choose a scene or passage that affected you strongly. Ask yourself: What happened in me as I read the words? As I thought about them and read them again? Discover what, specifically, it is in this scene or passage that makes you respond as you do.

3. Choose one character from the list below and tell me what your reaction is to this character and how that reaction changes (if it does) and develops over the course of Sons and Lovers. In telling me your response, you should touch down on specific scenes and, when appropriate, specific passages from the novel.

4. Early in the first chapter of Walden, Thoreau says that most of his readers "will accept such portions [of the book] as apply to them" (p. 1). I want you to write a letter to Thoreau about some portion of his book that applied to you, a particular passage or section that spoke to you. Your purpose in this letter is to show Thoreau how he got through to you and what kind of getting through it was.

5. Assume the point of view of Dunya, Sonia, Svidrigaylov, or Razumikhin and write a letter to Raskolnikov in prison in Siberia telling him how the two of you are alike and how, in some small way, that has helped you understand his crime.

[Joy Marsella]

In addition to assignments that require students to write straight narratives, I ask my classes, from about the middle of the semester on, to write persuasive papers also using a letter format.

Sample Assignments #2

1. I will be teaching English 250, American Literature, in the fall and am trying to decide whether or not to reorder Wolfe's Look Homeward, Angel as one of the books for my section. To help me make that decision I want you to write me a letter in

which you try to persuade me either to order the book or not to order it. Draw on your own experience of the book--your many responses to it, your various assessments of it--to support your argument pro or con.

2. Write a letter to one of your ex-high school English teachers and tell him why he should in the future make Murayama's All I Asking for Is My Body required reading in his class. Your purpose is to convince him to do what you want him to do, so you'll have to write about the novella in a way that will inspire him to do it.

3. Pretend that a New York publisher wants to publish Murayama's book and distribute it nationally. But there's a hitch. The book is too short for the market and so she wants Murayama to expand it--by at least 100 pages. Murayama is trying to decide whether to do it or not. Write a letter to him, telling him--on the basis of your experience of his book--whether he should. If you think he should, say what he should add in those extra 100 pages. And should he change anything in the book as it currently exists? If you think the book should remain just as it is, tell him why.

4. Pretend that the chairman of the English Department (Prof. Summersgill) has said that this book is not a "major" book and

therefore is not to be taught in English 250 because only "major" books belong in such a course. Write a letter to him that will convince him that he's wrong. Show him, on the basis of your experience of the book, that it is "major" in its own way and that it does have a place in a sophomore literature courses such as English 250.

A colleague, whose own assignments in sophomore literature are the traditional kind ("Discuss Ophelia's madness," etc.), read some of my students' papers recently. "Very exotic," he said, when he gave them back to me. "All those 'I's,' those 'I thought's,' 'I felt's.' This is what I was told in graduate school to get rid of. I was told that those 'I's' were unprofessional, naive." In answer to my colleague, let me quote what one of my students, on her course evaluation sheet, wrote: "I enjoyed the assignments much more than any I had in previous English classes because...I could say what I wanted to or what I thought about what I read."

I approve, of course. When my students do the kinds of assignments I have been talking to you about today, they discover that their own opinions and experiences are important and thus they learn to express themselves rather than to write what they think the teacher wants them to write. They also learn that they really have to think when they write. And finally--and what could be more important in an introduction to literature class--they learn to value the literature they have read.